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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

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A preferred vision for administering secondary schools : a reflective essay

Abstract

The chief purpose of this paper is to discuss the components of six leadership styles: autocratic, transactional, transformational, situational, expert thinking, and value-added. Throughout this paper, my objective is to identify the six styles and compare how each can be used in school administration. Finally, I will discuss my growth in school leadership along with plans for future improvements.

**A PREFERRED VISION FOR ADMINISTERING SECONDARY SCHOOLS:
A REFLECTIVE ESSAY**

**A Research Paper
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The Department of Educational
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Postsecondary Education
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**In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Arts in Education**

**by
Kurt A. Hempen**

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As I continue my pilgrimage and preparation for my administration degree, one of the major points of emphasis expressed deals with leadership styles. As I reflect, dissect, and contemplate leadership styles, it is very significant for me to establish a broad base of leadership skills in which I can depend on as a school leader. One of the reasons why I decided to become an administrator is because of my ability to lead. I feel that I have a unique and inherited ability to apply various leadership styles to the wide variety of situations related to education. I have the self-assurance to break down a situation, assess, and make a determination based on the evidence or components involved.

In order to enhance my success as a school leader, it is necessary that I understand and choose the correct procedures determined from each of the leadership styles. There are many different forms of leadership styles, which make it difficult to understand the various functions entwined with each style. Therefore, the chief purpose of this paper is to discuss the components of six leadership styles: autocratic, transactional, transformational, situational, expert thinking, and value-added. Throughout this paper, my objective is to identify the six styles and compare how each can be used in school administration. Finally, I will discuss my growth in school leadership along with plans for future improvements.

Autocratic

One of the early historic leadership styles that are affiliated with the military, big business, and education, would be the autocratic style. The autocratic leadership style would be described as a hierarchical structure in which the overall leader retains powers over his/her cohort. In this type of structure, the leader has the ability and authority to exercise coercive powers that mandate the actions of those who follow him/her. All decisions are decided on by the autocratic leader, and anyone who does not follow instructions risks the possibility of not receiving benefits, as well as being punished.

In the educational arena, leaders of this leadership style tend to possess and control almost all aspects of the school environment. They require conformity and support for all decisions made and expect staff to openly support such decisions. As a result, the teachers are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to seek approval from the leader. The principal in this case establishes dominance over the staff and creates an educational setting that is controlling and one that eliminates any confusion from other sources. Lewis (1993) observes that administrators that are having the most difficulty in the current context of school change are those who possess the autocratic style. Another example describing

autocratic school leader is found in the Argyris & Schon's Model I belief system (Argyris & Schon, 1978). This model suggests that autocratic leaders have a high emphasis on discipline, are constantly battling improper student and teacher behavior, and are unable to stay ahead of change. Typically, a school controlled by an autocratic leader tends to be smaller in size and very traditional in nature. Autocratic leaders operate under a conservative attitude, and the school system affiliated tends to follow suit.

An example of when the autocratic style is often used in the educational realm is when administrators deal with school law interpretations. In many situations the administrator relies on school attorneys to provide an autocratic answer, which the school administrator can provide to the staff. In these instances, teachers tend to more easily accept the autocratic decision being made, however, they still remain cautious.

Another example in which the autocratic style can be seen in education is when administrators deal with termination procedures. When dealing with the release of staff, principals are often isolated in data gathering and conversations with the individual or group being questioned. Ultimately, after a series of interventions with the person in question fail; the principal will then exercise his/her autocratic power by informing the individual that he/she will be terminated. The termination process most commonly affects probationary staff

members, however, tenured staff members also can be treated in the same manner.

I have worked with a superintendent that functioned as an autocratic leader over the school district. As a result, I noticed his dominance over the local school board and his ability to accomplish the goals he felt were most important. This dominance led to a problem with the district falling behind in educational changes in the areas of curriculum and instruction. His refusal to spend finances on new materials and not providing opportunities for teacher growth has limited the effectiveness of the school. As a result, the students have suffered which has lead to concerns from the community. Nevertheless, the major goal for this autocratic leader was to save the school district from closing because of a declining enrollment. This was his autocratic decision that everyone including staff and community members followed.

Transactional

The second leadership style is transactional. This style focuses on the use of rewards to achieve results. A transactional leader utilizes giving rewards in order to accomplish goals for improvement. The transactional leader understands that people are motivated by methods that benefit themselves. Self-motivation is an area that a transactional leader often discourages, simply because results are not accomplished through this method of motivation.

This leadership by bartering (Sergiovanni, 1990) leads by using a system of rewards and punishments to motivate people to perform. It takes direct leadership, close supervision, and control of extrinsic rewards. Plus, it successfully helps teachers realize what needs to be accomplished in order to reach the major objective. A transactional leader encourages incentive pay, higher wages, and other special circumstances to increase production and results. Silins (1992) suggests that the transactional leader:

1. exchanges rewards and promises of reward for followers' efforts,
2. recognizes needs and wants and establishes appropriate contingencies for performance, and
3. is responsive to a follower's immediate self-interest if it can be met through getting the work done. (p. 319)

The transactional leader achieves results through extrinsic motivational tactics that allow people to reach satisfaction by meeting individual needs. This leadership style allows both the employee as well as the employer to both achieve results and satisfaction at the same time. Transactions are the heart of the interchange between leader and follower (Silins, 1992).

The negative aspect of this type of leadership is that in many cases it is difficult to get everyone to agree on what the most

important goals are to accomplish. Transactional leadership only works when both the leaders and the followers understand and agree about the important tasks to be performed (Mitchell & Tucker, 1992). Another negative factor is that the motivators can all be found in the Herzberg's hygiene level (Herzberg, 1959). This suggests that the transactional leader experiences difficulty in maintaining long-term improvement because of a lack of intrinsic motivation by the employees. Areas like self-actualization and self-esteem are not improved or utilized because the transactional leader has not emphasized the importance of utilizing intrinsic motivation when teaching. A transactional leader is successful at keeping things status quo, but is unsuccessful at implementing change or improvement for long periods of time.

Examples that fall under this category would include the use of Phase I - III money established by the legislation of Iowa. It is very clear that the main focus of these programs are to stimulate educators by providing incentives to encourage educators to get involved in various programs that will enhance effective teaching.

Local examples include using Phase III money for providing staff in-services or workshops. Some schools also use the money to send staff members to receive extra training or education in a particular area, in hopes of receiving a more qualified teacher in return. All of these are an attempt by schools at the local level to

motivate teachers to do tasks to improve the quality of education in the district.

Transformational

The third leadership style is often considered the model component of leadership when dealing with change. As we enter the twenty-first century, transformational leadership seems to be a style in which many schools across the country are interested in. Lewis (1993) predicts that by the end of this decade, administrators will be in a context that greatly accepts site-based management, emphasizes and strengthens the current school reform, values collaboration and cooperation and depends on staff development at the school site. It is safe to say that each one of these categories has become very important issues in education today. When dealing with school reform, the transformational leader possesses the qualities needed for success.

Transformational leaders tend to model after transactional leaders when dealing with change. Both leadership styles tend to rely on intrinsic motivation strategies that encourage members to take risks. However, most educational leaders view transformational leaders as people who deal with the big picture when focusing on changes in philosophy and education of a school district.

Transactional leaders tend to concentrate more on the everyday changes that take place. Because of its intrinsic nature

transformational leadership allows everyone to become a stakeholder in long-term reform. It is based on the idea that what is intrinsically rewarding gets done, and because we believe it is good, we then feel obligated to get it done (Sergiovanni, 1992).

A transformational leader is consistently trying to improve a situation by purposely involving others in a collaborative effort when making a decision. Seeking input from members of an organization is an important component for the over-all success of the school. The transformational leader understands that the best way to solve problems is to allow those working in the organization to allow for input. Leithwood (1992) identifies three fundamental goals of transformational leaders:

1. maintain a collaborative structure
2. foster teacher development, and
3. improve group problem-solving (work smarter not harder). (p.10)

Sagor (1992) identifies the three building blocks of transformational leadership:

1. a clear and unified purpose,
2. a common cultural perspective, and
3. a constant push for improvement. (p.13)

The transformational leader facilitates in establishing common goals, visions, and missions within an organization.

Transformational leaders spend a great amount of their time gathering and providing important data to the group and stress the importance of consensus building when making a decision. Central to transformational leadership is collaboration that involves teachers, parents, and students and strategies are often established that allow these three groups to work together.

Transformational leaders understand the power of collaboration when attempting to change a system. They realize that the quickest way to get people on board is through ownership. Therefore, transformational leaders encourage risk-taking and push the organization with the intent to improve for the future.

Transformational leadership is utilized in many different areas of school leadership today. Such areas include: clarifying and prioritizing goals, reducing staff isolation and stimulating teacher commitment; fostering staff development; developing a supportive collegial environment and staff commitment; engaging in frequent communication about cultural norms, values and beliefs; and celebrating, recognizing and appreciating the work of staff and students (Leithwood, Begley & Cousins, 1992).

Community relations are another applicable area in which transformational leadership is demonstrated. In education today, communication with the public is essential when making decisions. It is important to have input from all stakeholders in order to develop

ownership and unity of purpose (Crowson, 1992). This is why transformational leaders succeed in developing positive relations with all stakeholders.

I have seen the positive side of transformational leadership when I was employed at the Roland-Story Middle School. The principal did an excellent job of promoting the concept of shared decision-making and he went out of his way to listen to any suggestions made by the faculty. This principal was also an excellent communicator and he was not afraid to take a risk when trying to improve the quality of education for the students of Roland-Story. As a result of his efforts, the middle school functioned at a very high level because faculty members felt good about coming to work. All of the teachers were encouraged to explore and the environment was one that I would classify as an open system in the educational arena.

Situational

The fifth leadership style is based on the model of Hersey's situational leadership (Hersey, 1985). The key to situational leadership is the leaders ability to determine what the maturity level of their followers is in relation to the job. After a determination has been made, the situational leader then decides whether or not a "people" style or a "task" driven style should be utilized for the completion of a job. Obviously, the most effective situational leader

would be the one who could manage both at the same time.

Situational leaders have to be able to assess the situation and know enough about leadership skills to make a good judgement about what will be best in a given situation (Lewis, 1993). Understanding the situation and being flexible to change decisions based on their importance is key for being an effective situational leader.

Several different leadership styles may be applied as a situational leader. For example, situational leaders could work with a group of people who may be at a very low maturity level. In this case the situational leader would have to be autocratic in nature to make sure the group is headed in the right direction. In time, the group will become more knowledgeable and their level of maturity will increase with experience. At this point, the transactional leader could shift from an autocratic leader to a transactional leader and begin to encourage his/her ideas for completion. As the group becomes even more mature, the situational leader could then apply a more transformational style when dealing with decision-making. The final step in this process would conclude when the group was self-sufficient and the situational leader would serve as a monitor for task completion by periodically communicating with the group. This four step process relates very closely to Sergiovanni's (1990) four stages: bartering, building, bonding, and banking. The key component of the

four would be bonding because it relates to relationship building and task building as a leader.

Situational leadership is based on two very important components: having the ability to understand and identify a problem and determining what instrument or leadership style to utilize to solve the situation. Flexibility is another important factor as well as communication when trying to improve the maturity of a group.

During my practicum I worked with an administrator who mastered the use of situational leadership with his secretaries. Both of the secretaries were at different levels of maturity, and their ability to complete various tasks were at the opposite ends of the spectrum. One of the secretaries was older and more experienced; therefore the administrator utilized a more self-sufficient approach and allowed her to do her job in a more flexible manner. This particular secretary was very self-sufficient and she was confident in her abilities to do her job correctly.

On the other hand, the second secretary was new and inexperienced and the administrator followed a more autocratic approach in relation to task completion. She constantly needed guidance and required a great amount of time for nurturing. She was very motivated but she lacked the confidence needed to be able to complete her job without regular guidance by the principal. The administrator took the time to provide assistance whenever she

needed it and he worked hard to build up her maturity level throughout the school year.

I have been assessing my leadership skills during the past three years and I feel my style best fits the situational leadership style. My ability to recognize situations as they arise and come up with appropriate measures to solve the problems is a strength of mine. I clearly understand the importance of first assessing a situation before drastically trying to solve a problem too quickly. Understanding problems and making the correct decisions are key factors for the success of a situational leader.

Expert Thinking

The expert thinking leadership style is based on the importance of using the technique of problem solving when trying to solve a situation. The expert thinking style also tends to include a lot of components from the situational leadership style, which was discussed earlier in this paper. Lewis (1993) indicates that while the so-called situational leadership model prescribes given styles or skills for given situations, she suggests there can be no one-to-one correspondence, nor can situations or styles be prescribed. Instead, out of the myriad of possibilities within an organization's stream of experience, the leader defines the situation and produces the appropriate response to it as a single act borne of experience, knowledge, insight, and confidence.

Many factions have argued that school officials using the expert thinking style of leadership are more qualified to make the best decision. Those who utilize their cognitive abilities as a school leader will make decisions in a calm and rational manner. Leithwood & Steinbach (1993) make three assertions:

1. For school leaders to be most productive, they need to think expertly about their school contexts and the consequences for the practices they choose.
2. Quality leadership combines expert thinking with the capacities to act transformationally, when such actions are warranted.
3. School leaders may be highly expert thinkers and yet not act as transformationally as do their less expert colleagues. Furthermore, in some circumstances high levels of transformational practice are not uncontested indicators of highly expert thinking.

(p.312)

Expert thinking requires a school leader to utilize all of the abilities they possess and combine them when making a decision. Utilizing the mind and relying on past experiences will go along way in effectively leading a school system. Leithwood & Steinbach (1993) also suggest that expert thinkers are able to do this because they:

- . are able to control intense moods and remain calm

- during problem solving,
- . are more self-confident about their ability to solve ill-structured problems, and
- . are more likely to reflect about their behavior, thoughts and moods. (p. 317)

Leithwood (1994) also adds six types of mental activities found in expert thinkers:

- . Problem interpretation: a leader's understanding on what is the nature of the problem.
 - . Goals: relatively immediate purpose that the leader believes he needs to achieve in response to his interpretation of the problem.
 - . Constraints: barriers or obstacles that must be overcome if an acceptable solution is to be found.
 - . Solution processes: what the leader does to solve the problem in light of his interpretation of the problem.
 - . Principles/values: purposes, principles, laws, doctrines, values, and assumptions guiding the leader's thinking.
 - . Affect: the feelings, mood, and sense of self-confidence the leader experiences when involved in problem-solving.
- (p. 512)

In a nutshell, the expert thinker is confident in executing all of the leadership styles discussed through out this paper and often combines several at the same time. An effective expert thinker has the ability to assess a situation, come up with a plan of attack, do so in a timely manner, and involve those who are being affected. The more experience a person has, the better chance of being an effective expert thinker. Identifying ones core values can serve as a guiding tool when deciding on a problem-solving strategy to utilize as an expert thinker. Once a principal has established his/her values to live by, then he/she will be better suited to make decisions based on the values established for them. When one understands and projects those values to others, then the decision-making process will become more consistent and accepted.

In my experience as an administrative assistant, I quickly came to the conclusion that each school day offered a different set of challenges. It did not take long for me to understand the importance of being flexible, calm, and rationale when dealing with various problems as they arose. Each day was different, and I tried to handle each situation in its own unique way. As I reflect back, expertise and experience from handling each situation was valuable in making me a more effective leader. The more I dealt with each situation, the better I become accustomed to making the right decision.

Value-added

Value-added leadership emphasizes the leadership of all the professionals involved in an organization. Under value-added leadership when someone asks, who shall lead? One increasingly popular answer is, many different people (Green 1994). Lewis (1993) further suggests that leadership is not reserved for administrators alone. It is just as important for teachers and other educators to evaluate their leadership capacities and adapt them to working with peers, parents, students, and the community. In this situation each teacher brings their own unique perspective to a situation and this increases their intrinsic motivation to consistently experiment and improve as an educator. This concept allows both leaders and followers to elevate their abilities to a new level and the level of enthusiasm will increase as a result.

Value-added leadership is based on Sergiovanni's (1992) moral leadership and emphasizes an in this together mentality. It focuses on higher-order intrinsic motivation, moral motives, needs esteem, autonomy, self-actualization, and the moral questions of goodness, righteousness, duty, and obligation (Sergiovanni, 1990). Lewis (1993) states that Sergiovanni was once a strong proponent of leadership skills, but he now favors substituting for true professionalism. Ultimately a leader of this category has traveled beyond transformational leadership.

Under value-added leadership, each member understands one another and is motivated to achieve the same goals together. All members are intrinsically motivated to be at their best on a consistent basis and strive hard for perfection.

Ultimately we would be fooling ourselves if we believed that value-added perfection was attainable. There is no way that a school leader can expect all teachers to be perfect, but we can expect them to try to be perfect. As long as the effort for perfection is consistent, then we as school leaders can accept that sort of mentality in education. To me the best faculty member is one who strives for perfection and is not discouraged when things go wrong, but enjoys the challenge of being the best they can be.

MY LEADERSHIP STYLE

I feel the characteristics of a situational leader combined with some components of an expert thinker will best suit my leadership style. One of the strengths I witnessed during my practicum was my ability to assess situations as they arose. My personality allows me to work effectively with members from any of the maturity levels we have discussed in this program. Plus, I have a unique ability to motivate people to the next level, and I truly believe this tool will serve me well as a school leader.

Since my values are grounded internally, this will allow me to make sound judgements based on the situation. I also understand

the importance of being flexible and patient as a leader. I realize that everyone is different; therefore I must be patient enough to work with the different maturity levels of people on a consistent basis.

Education today is ever changing and the role of a principal is becoming more complex in nature. As leaders of the educational field, we must understand the process of change and strive hard to establish skills needed to challenge teachers to provide the best possible education for all students. As a leader, I must continually model and provide a vision that will lead the organization to best practice procedures. I must be willing to take risks and utilize the power of reflection when analyzing my decisions and experiences. As a situational leader, learning from my experiences will enhance my ability to successfully lead a school system to great heights.

Finally, I understand that I am just entering my journey into educational leadership. With this in mind, I must continually find ways to improve my understanding of the different leadership styles discussed through out this paper. My research has given me a sound background to rely on and I feel confident in my abilities. The course work as well as the practicum experiences will serve as valuable tools for the future and I have become a much more effective school leader as a result. I have the passion for educational leadership and look forward to the many new challenges ahead. My experiences at the University of Northern Iowa have been rewarding and I now look

forward to working with many educators during the twenty-first century.

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